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UBUNTU – I Am Because We Are

A traditional African philosophy is a great teacher for interconnecting
By Adina Erwin

THE WORD “UBUNTU” ORIGINATES from one of the Bantu dialects of Africa, and is pronounced as uu-Boon-too. It is a traditional African philosophy that speaks particularly about the fact that one cannot exist in isolation. We are all interconnected. The South African Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu states that “a person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole.”

In recent times, the philosophy of Ubuntu has been applied in religious, political and social contexts. At the beginning of the 2007-2008 NBA basketball season, Coach Doc Rivers instilled in his players the importance of team play and sacrificing one's own personal interests for the sake of the team. The team was composed of Kevin Garnett, Ray Allen and Paul Pierce, utter titans in their game! To say that the team's skill set was phenomenal would have been an understatement, but:

- Could these players spell team without adding an “I”?
- Would each of them be willing to sacrifice for the sake of the team?
- Would they share their knowledge and skills with each other and the rest of the team?
- Could they collectively work towards common goals?

These were potential challenges Coach Doc Rivers needed to address. Does any of this sound familiar? It is not exclusive to the basketball world or the religious and political realms. These are the same problems that we face as facility managers everyday. Employees often focus on their own personal interests or interests of their department rather than the interests of the organization as a whole. Consider these examples:

- “I am about to get paid!” Motivated by salary incentives, the director of marketing sells two venue sponsorships that yield lucrative returns for the organization. However, he does not share important information about the sponsorship deal with the operations department, causing fulfillment obstacles and jeopardizing the relationship with the client.
- “We have lost our sense of WE.” The general manager of a performing arts center worries about the challenges she is experiencing with the lack of interdepartmental cooperation. The production department and event department are not speaking, the box office and the marketing department are constantly at odds and the police coordinator is at war with the fire marshal.
- “It’s like herding cats!” The president of a small theatre is reviewing the proposed budgets submitted by his department heads. He becomes frustrated because each department has requested monies for projects that read like a letter to Santa Claus. Furthermore, the requests are completely unrealistic during these tough economic times and ultimately detrimental to the financial well-being of the theatre.

Doc Rivers integrated the Ubuntu philosophy into every aspect of the game from practice to pre-game huddles. This strategy inspired collective success over individual achievement which ultimately led to winning the NBA championship. I would bet that the examples mentioned earlier are very familiar to many of us as facility managers. With heavy work loads and not enough hours in the day, it seems daunting to integrate the Ubuntu philosophy effectively, but it is necessary for sustainable organizational survival. Here are five approaches you can use to implement this philosophy in your venue.

“People who share a sense of purpose and common direction can get where they are going quicker and easier because they are traveling on the thrust of one another.”

- 1 Establish organizational purpose and direction. People who share a sense of purpose and common direction can get where they are going quicker and easier because they are traveling on the thrust of one another. This is often done through the collaborative creation of mission and vision statements, goals and objectives.
- 2 Communicate the Ubuntu philosophy throughout every aspect of your organization. Explain Ubuntu to all employees and communicate how it is relevant to the success of your venue. Explore the opportunities to communicate this philosophy within your organization during weekly meetings, event briefings, online newsletters and other communication avenues.
- 3 Implement a “Knowledge Management” approach. Leo Platt, former CEO of Hewlett Packard, once noted that “if only HP knew what HP knows, it would be three times more profitable.” Knowledge management is about creating systems that enable organizations to tap into the knowledge, experiences, and creativity of their employees to improve performance. Find opportunities to harvest ideas from this resource and create avenues to share and develop them. Try involving employees in the creation of initiatives and programs that are outside of their normal scope of work. You would be surprised where you

might find aptitude and interest within your organization. For example, invite the stagehand steward to participate on a business development task force for your venue. Remember that “none of us is as smart as all of us!”

- 4 Remove organizational barriers to Ubuntu. Many organizations have metrics, incentives and rewards that contribute to internal competition, and we-they thinking between work groups. These weaken the “we” culture and create silos within your venue by supporting separation from the whole. Examples of this are often found within compensation structures and inconsistent policy practices. Identify these systems and procedures and change them so that they promote team play and cooperation.
- 5 Focus on internal customer service. Great customer service begins within. If you were to research organizations that are known for legendary customer service, you would find that the focus of their customer service operation begins internally. Each department of your venue is a customer of the other and the type of service they receive is the type of service they will give to your external customer. It all begins with selection, empowerment and encouragement. Hire people that understand, supports and disseminates the “we” culture. Then empower them with the tools to succeed through effective training programs. Finally, encourage success through recognition from simply saying hello as you walk through the lobby to celebrating anniversaries for service to your venue.

Ubuntu is a philosophy that can serve as a powerful change agent within your organization. We all work in ever-changing, fast-paced environments filled with multi-tasking and deadlines. It is easy to begin thinking of our personal interests first and the interests of the organization second. However, remember to take a lesson from the 2007-2008 world champion Boston Celtics. Collective success rules over individual achievement. I am because we are! **fm**

Adina Erwin is assistant general manager for the Fox Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia. Contact her at Adina.Erwin@foxtheatre.org.